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ABSTRACT

The methodology, results, and implications of a study of instructional leadership styles of principals of four unusually successful inner city schools are outlined in this general summary. The principals studied were selected with the help of expert opinion and student test scores. Data comprise ethnographic observations and interviews of the principals over 17 weeks; interviews with teachers, other administrators, and students; school observations; logging of principals' time use; school records; and faculty surveys. Results include the finding that principals in three schools focused attention on important instructional goals and used slogans as an attempt to rally support for those goals. In three schools principals created a more positive learning climate by establishing a general appearance of cleanliness and sense of order and discipline. In every school attention was given to the curriculum, and these efforts were successful when closely monitored and led by someone respected by teachers. Teacher supervision was ineffective in most cases. In none of the schools was the principal perceived as an instructional leader; rather, other staff members were influential, and principals devoted their attention to pupil discipline. The concluding discussion recommends that principals function as generalists providing teachers with vision, direction, and coordination while assigning leadership responsibilities to competent support staff. (MJL)

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Instructional Leadership: Four Ethnographic Studies on Junior High School Principals

Executive Summary

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EA 016 199

The problem of the study might best be framed somewhat broadly in this fashion:

> How does instructional leadership happen in urban junior high schools that seem more successful than most?

That general problem subsumes these specific issues:

1. How do principals adopt different styles of leadership to respond to special situations and organizational constraints?
2. What other sources of leadership develop when the principal does not play an active and directive role?
3. What special features of the junior high school affect the role of the principal as an instructional leader?

METHODOLOGY

Selection of Participants

This study was conducted in a large urban school district located on the east coast of the United States. The selection process was conducted over a two month period in late spring of 1981. Two sources of information were used in selecting the sample schools: expert opinion and school data on student achievement. Initially we conferred with the system's district superintendents and staff from the Office of Research and Evaluation to identify several effective inner city junior high schools serving minority students whose families live on low incomes. We also asked if these same schools were managed by principals who believed that instructional leadership was a significant part of their responsibility. Finally, we asked these experts to identify teachers, specialists, or administrators, other than the principal, who were making major contributions to the improvement of a school's instructional

program. These opinions were cross checked and the pool of candidates expanded when we discussed our early choices with knowledgeable teachers, administrators, district specialists and key members of several community organizations.

The combination of expert opinion regarding a school, its principal, and its staff and indications of improvement on standardized tests formed the criteria for school selection. A list of eight schools was developed. Each principal was interviewed by the researchers to assess interest in participation and their perceptions about instructional leadership. From this group four principals and their schools were selected as the sample to be studied.

Data Gathering Procedures

The study made use of the following data gathering processes:

1. Ethnographic observations of the principals. Principals were observed directly over a period of seventeen weeks. The observations were essentially ethnographic in nature; that is, we observed the principals without preconceived ideas as to what we would find, and attempted to use the observations as a way of understanding the principals' world as they see it.

2. Ethnographic interviews with principals. The interviews were both informal and formal. The informal interviews occurred during the course of the observations and were designed to illuminate the observational data. The formal interviews were arranged throughout the data gathering process at a time convenient for the principal and were primarily descriptive in nature, focusing on the issue of instructional leadership.

3. Interviews with teachers. Eight teachers were selected at random in two of the schools. The assistance provided by a doctoral student allowed ten additional teachers to be interviewed in the remaining two schools. Teachers were interviewed by the investigators in order to ascertain their views about these matters:

a. What do you think is meant by "instructional leadership" as it applies to the role of the junior high school principal?

b. Can you tell me some stories or incidents which show how your principal acts as an instructional leader?

c. Are there occasions when persons other than the principal assume the role of instructional leader? Can you describe how that happens?

4. Interviews with other administrators. Vice-principals, department chairs, counselors, and reading and math specialists were interviewed to expand our understanding of how the school is organized.

5. Interviews with students. Seven students selected at random from various grades were interviewed to learn their perceptions of how the instructional program helps them achieve in basic skills.

6. Observations of school. The school was observed informally as the observation and interviews described above were conducted.

7. Principal's log. We worked with each principal to develop a log which enabled that principal to collect his or her own data about use of time. During those weeks when the principal was not being observed directly, he or she was asked to keep the log in such a manner that both the principal and the investigators would be able to analyze time use as it relates to instructional concerns.

8. Records. The researcher asked that a mailbox be labelled with his name and that all routine mail teachers receive be automatically placed in the researcher's box. Additional records also were requested for analysis including: results from standardized tests; progress reports; end of the year reports; goal statements; teacher evaluations; and attendance records of students, teachers, and administrators.

Data Analysis Procedure

The eight data sources were analyzed as described below:

1. Ethnographic observations. The notes from the field journal were analyzed closely and coded initially in two ways: these behaviors seem directly related to the role of instructional leadership; these behaviors do not seem related directly to the role of instructional leadership.

These behaviors which seem related were then further studied in order to derive a taxonomic analysis of instructional leadership behaviors.

2. Ethnographic interviews with the principals. The tapes of the interviews were reviewed and closely analyzed. The first analysis identified those parts of the interview that relate to the issue of instructional leadership. Those sections that relate to instructional leadership then were further coded for more specific analysis of principal views.

3. Interviews with the teachers. The interviews with the teachers were reviewed and analyzed in order to ascertain common and unique responses to the two questions posed in the interview: what do the teachers conceive is meant by "instructional leadership of a principal"? In what specific ways does the principal act as an instructional leader?

4. Interviews with other administrators. Interviews with other administrators were reviewed and analyzed to assess how the principal delegates aspects of the school program.

5. Interviews with students. Analysis of student interviews focused on their perceptions and understanding of the following issues: the purpose of school; teacher and administrator expectations in regard to student performance in basic skills; the rigidity or flexibility of academic standards; sense or orderliness and safety in school; accessibility of principal and teachers; responsiveness of principal and teacher to student needs or concerns.

6. Observations of school. The notes in the field journal relating to the observations of the school were coded to identify, first, those aspects of the school environment that seemed supportive of or conducive to instruction; and second, those supportive aspects which seemed to be directly a result of the principal's interventions.

7. Principal's log. The principals' logs were analyzed first to determine what percentage of the principal's time was devoted to instructional concerns. That instructional time was then further analyzed to identify important sub-categories as they related to instructional improvement.

8. Records. Records were organized into content categories. Analysis focused on the emergence of recurrent themes with specific attention to those documents that communicate about the school's instructional progress.

9. Surveys. In addition to the use of qualitative methods of investigation the researchers used two surveys to assess each faculty's perception of the nature of instructional leadership in their school. Both surveys were administered near the end of the study. One of the surveys called the Additional Information Survey asked five questions which measured the frequency of administrative observations and evaluations of teacher performance, the visibility of the administrators in the halls and cafeteria, the progress the school is making, and a rank order of the principal's priorities.

   The second survey called Sources of Instructional Leadership (SOIL) was developed to display the instructional leadership patterns by role and function in schools. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent that various persons perform 31 tasks related to instructional leadership.

These separate analyses were then used to develop a composite picture of the junior high school principal as an instructional leader.

SUMMARY

The first thing that seems to be making a difference is the existence of clearly stated goals--and explicit policies relating to those goals. In three of the schools at least, the principal had focused the faculty's and students' attention on important instructional goals: improve reading and mathematics achievement. And in two of those schools the principal had rather directly established policies about homework, grades, and promotion that supported those goals.

The second thing we note is that in almost every case the principal was consciously or unconsciously using slogans that he or she adopted as a rallying cry around those goals. The slogans were of several sorts: academics plus, mastery learning, our school family, the spirit of our school. In one school the "academics plus" slogan seemed to be taken seriously by the faculty because it was supported by explicit policies that were reviewed and enforced. In other schools it seemed empty and meaningless to the faculty. The results were only slightly better for "mastery learning". Individual teachers did use mastery learning techniques in three of the schools, but the number involved remained small. The slogans that spoke more of interpersonal relationships ("our family", "our spirit") were similarly mixed in their success. In one of the schools the teachers seemed to take seriously the belief that they were part of a family, even as they cynically mocked the idea. In the other school where there was much talk about spirit, the teachers spoke instead of disenchantment and discouragement. Slogans about the climate, it seems are never fully believed--and are only partially accepted when

the perceived reality matches the slogan.

The third factor that seems to make a major difference is the learning climate. We use this term to include both the appearance of the physical plant and the sense of order and discipline that pervades both non-instructional and instructional areas. The schools in this study were in a physical condition that we want to describe as appalling: roofs leaked, windows were broken; lockers doors were damaged. But in three of the schools, the principal seemed to have been able to mobilize the energies of custodians and teachers to make the place at least look clean. And in three of the schools there was a sense of general order and good discipline.

The fourth factor is that in all the schools at least someone was giving attention to the curriculum--the courses that were offered and the content of those courses. That attention was not always systematic and continuing; but we did see people working on it.

This curriculum work seems to have been effective when it was led by someone close to and respected by the teachers--and when its implementation was closely monitored. When it was imposed by the principal--who often did not systematically analyze the likely effects of the mandates--and when it was not followed up with close monitoring; the curriculum work seems not to have made any lasting impact.

In one of the schools staff development seemed to have made a difference. Again, it was staff development initiated and conducted by an energetic department head whom the teachers respected. The rest of

the staff development that took place in these schools seems from our perspective to have been almost a total waste of time and effort. All the workshops on mastery learning, even when they were conducted by experts and had the support of the principal, seem not to have made a pervasive difference.

What was obviously not making difference at all was teacher supervision. In only one of the schools was the vice-principal perceived as an effective supervisor. All the rest of what passed for supervision in these schools was only a series of brief and unsystematic observations, with a written summary of the highlights. We do not intend here to be too critical of these principals for whom we have a continuing respect. They were busy people, trying their best to hold together large schools in a time of crisis.

Who was providing these functions that seemed to make a difference? In general the data seem to suggest that when a new principal arrives on the scene, he or she takes a very active role in initiating projects, making changes, and developing new programmatic thrusts. Then as the years go by, the principal's attention moves out beyond the school, as he aspires to new spheres of influence. He delegates more at the school and takes a less active role in instructional leadership.

The second part of our answer about who provides instructional leadership in the junior high school is, "It all depends." We began by looking very closely at the principal. But our early findings suggested to us that we needed to look more broadly and more inclusively. Our study now seems to give tentative support to other research which

suggests that in the secondary school, instructional leadership is more diffuse and complex than it is in the elementary school. In two of the junior high schools, the reading chairperson seemed to be playing an influential role. In one, the English department chair was perceived as the key instructional leader. In a third, a vice-principal had been a driving influence until she became ill. In fact, we were surprised to discover that in none of the schools was the principal perceived to be providing instructional leadership.

What are they doing, if they are not providing instructional leadership? For the most part, they are giving their attention to pupil discipline. Some are doing it more effectively than others. But one thing we think we have learned from this study is that the principals of urban junior high schools are centrally concerned with pupil discipline. They worry about it, they spend much time talking about it to faculty, and they devote much time to trying to enforce good discipline. While it is obvious that discipline is essential, it seems clear to us that it is pushing aside other important concerns.

DISCUSSION

Two questions organize the discussion section of this report: What do we mean by instructional leadership? How can instructional leadership be improved?

Our definition of instructional leadership includes these functions:

- selecting, supervising and evaluating faculty
- setting high instructional goals and academic standards
- communicating the belief that all children can learn
- selecting and refining instructional materials and strategies
- coordinating instructional policy within and across subject area, departments and grade levels
- monitoring student progress
- establishing a clean, safe, pleasant environment conducive to teaching and learning

We found that instructional leadership functions are not exercised consistently by any of the administrators we studied. Certain functions mandated by the school code, like evaluating teacher performance, are performed by the principal. Principals do, within system limits, select teachers. Many of them set goals. But if we examine how principals and vice-principals use their time we find them mainly performing management functions. They keep the school running by maintaining the building, patrolling the halls, securing substitute teachers, and most importantly, handling discipline. Days are filled with useful management tasks but these may not necessarily produce an improved instructional program at the end of the school year.

Helping administrators become instructional leaders is a difficult task. After a decade of exhortation that principals should be instructional leaders, at least at the junior high school level, that advice has not been heeded. It will take more than advice or pressure to make the change. One way to work toward that change is to distinguish between two levels of instructional leadership--general and specific. It is well established that secondary school teachers do not look to administrators for expertise in solving classroom problems. Teachers perceive administrators as too removed from the daily teaching interactions to offer credible help (Gorton, 1971). However administrators can be effective in providing a generalist's level of expertise. As generalists they provide vision, direction, and coordination. They link the parts of the program into a coherent whole; they monitor school-wide achievement; they suggest changes in program when necessary. These generalist functions are complex, requiring professional expertise in academic planning, program articulation and evaluation.

Secondary schools seem to need leaders with special expertise in various subjects, in addition to an administrator who can provide some central direction. It therefore would seem wise for secondary school administrators to systematically analyze the talents and interests of their support staff, including assistant principals, team leaders, and department chairs. Those support staff with the necessary competence should be assigned leadership functions. Departmental leaders may require essential training for instructional leadership at a department level. Obviously if these leaders are to be instructional leaders they

must be given the necessary time to do the job well.

Restructuring the principal's, the vice-principal's, and department chair's roles so that they have the expertise and time to perform instructional leadership tasks effectively should improve the quality of a school's academic program. But if those changes are not rooted in a profound vision that most children can learn, we think the improvement will be slight. We differentiate between an educational slogan and a vision. Slogans as we mentioned in our summary abound in schools. Often they are superficial cliches which rarely have the capacity to transform the direction of the school, or the level of commitment of the staff. They do not change school priorities. An educational vision should have the power to convince a staff that it is possible for students to learn, master, and excel. While this vision is encouraging, it is also disturbing because it will link student failure with the degree of effectiveness of the educational program, the teaching staff, and the administrators.

We would close this report by attempting to put these findings in context. This study was undertaken and completed at a time when this school district was in the midst of a crisis even more severe than most that had confronted it. A fifty-day teacher strike delayed the study. The newspapers daily carried stories of impending fiscal bankruptcy. The superintendent of schools was at the center of a divisive political conflict that finally ended in his resignation. Yet in the midst of all of this, these four principals and their faculties where somehow making a difference. Scores on achievement tests were improving, even though

those improvements were not always dramatic. Those improvements were being effected in very complex ways. The principal was a factor, of course--in ways that often defied the conventional wisdom about instructional leadership. Certain key vice-principals and department chairs were exercising influence beyond the parameters of their roles. And in each of the four schools there were individual teachers who had decided that they could make a difference, that the struggle was not hopeless, that minority students could learn and that teaching is still a profession, not a job.